

Fewer Immigrants Settle in Nonmetro Areas and Most Fare Less Well than Metro Immigrants

Recent attention to the issue of immigration in the United States has led to the addition of questions about immigration status to the Current Population Survey. Data from the March 1996 version show that Mexico has been the single largest source of immigration to the nonmetro United States, that a large proportion of nonmetro immigrants are children, and that nonmetro immigrants generally have lower earnings, higher unemployment, and higher poverty rates than metro immigrants and nonmetro natives. Fewer immigrants live in nonmetro areas than in metro, but they are concentrated in particular areas.

Current debate on such issues as immigration and welfare reform has brought increased attention to the need for information on the characteristics of the immigrant population in the United States. In 1996, 24.6 million persons in the United States were foreign-born, representing 9 percent of the U.S. population. Although most foreign-born persons (95 percent) resided in metro areas, comprising 11 percent of the metro population, immigrants who settled in nonmetro areas were concentrated in a few places. While comprising only 2 percent of the total nonmetro population, immigration patterns that follow employment opportunities and kinship and community migration networks have led to relatively dense pockets of nonmetro immigrant settlement. In the small towns and communities of rural America, such concentrations may have significant social and economic effects on host communities.

For example, in Imperial County, California, along the border with Mexico, 40 percent of the county's 30-percent population increase since 1990 has been the result of immigration. Similarly, in two Texas border counties, Maverick and Starr, over 40 percent of their population increases since 1990 (28 percent in Maverick; 33 percent in Starr) have been the result of immigration. Finney County, Kansas, the site of large meatpacking facilities, has seen a population increase of 7.5 percent since 1990, over 50 percent of it the result of immigration.

As these figures suggest, immigrants residing in nonmetro areas in 1996 were not evenly distributed throughout the United States. Thirty-seven percent of all nonmetro immigrants lived in the South, followed by 35 percent in the West and 14 percent each in the Northeast and the Midwest (fig. 1). These regional distributions, however, obscure concentration of nonmetro immigrant settlement in particular States. In the South, for example, Texas, home to 17 percent of the total U.S. nonmetro immigrant population, accounted for 46 percent of all nonmetro immigrants residing in the South. North Carolina, with the second largest proportion of immigrant residents in the South, was home to only 12 percent of that region's nonmetro immigrant population. Overall, only 2 percent of the nonmetro population in the South were immigrant. The West had the largest proportion of nonmetro immigrant population—7 percent—followed by the Northeast with 3 percent. In the Midwest, only 1 percent of the nonmetro population were foreign-born.

Metro immigrants displayed a slightly different pattern, reflecting the location of the urban centers that are home to the highest proportions of immigrants—Los Angeles, New York, and Miami.

Mexico Largest Single Source of Nonmetro Immigrants

Mexico has been the largest source of nonmetro immigrants in recent years, and the proportion of nonmetro immigrants coming from Mexico has been increasing, from 40 percent for immigrants arriving before 1980, to 48 percent for immigrants of the 1980's and 57 percent of those who have arrived in the 1990's (fig. 2). Asia has risen from being the third largest source of nonmetro immigrants who entered the United States before 1980 to the second largest source for more recent immigrants. Meanwhile, Europe has fallen behind both Asia, and Central and South America and the Caribbean as a source of nonmetro immigrants since 1980.

The proportion of metro immigrants from Mexico has remained consistently around one-fourth. A larger proportion of metro than nonmetro immigrants has come from countries in Central and South America, and the decline of European immigrants and the rise of Asian immigrants has been much more pronounced among metro immigrants.

Older Immigrants More Often Naturalized Citizens than Younger Immigrants. . .

Many characteristics of immigrants depend on when they arrived in the United States and on whether or not they become naturalized citizens or remain noncitizens. Year of entry and citizenship status are somewhat interdependent, since adult immigrants must live in the United States for at least 5 years before becoming eligible for naturalization; the more recent the immigrant, the less likely he or she will be naturalized simply on procedural grounds. Foreign-born children of immigrants generally become citizens when their parents are naturalized; U.S.-born children of immigrants become citizens at birth and are not included in the immigrant population.

Regardless of year of entry, however, nonmetro immigrants were more likely to be naturalized citizens (37 percent) than metro immigrants (32 percent). Older immigrants also were more likely to have become naturalized citizens. Among those age 35 and older, for both nonmetro and metro residences and all years of entry, immigrants who had become naturalized outnumbered those who had remained noncitizens, unlike those in younger age groups. Thus, measures of the characteristics of naturalized citizens, who generally fare better than noncitizens in such areas as educational achievement, earnings, and poverty status, partially reflect their older age structure.

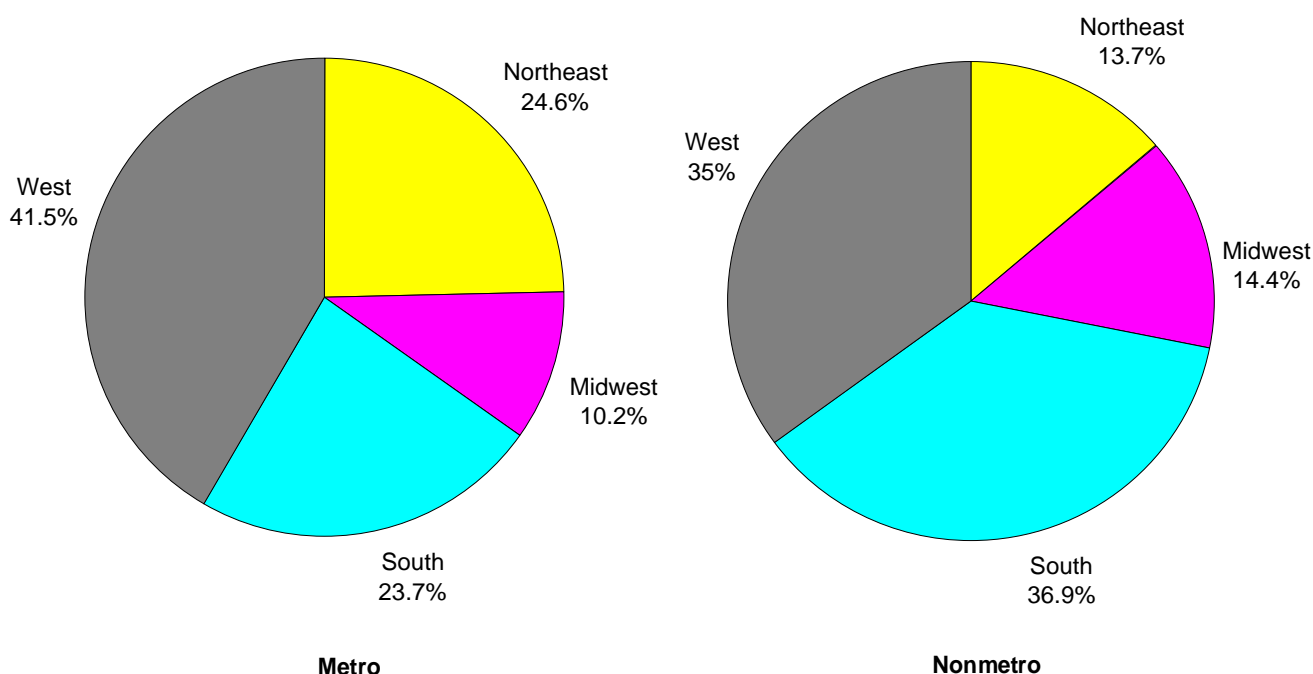
. . .but Many Recent Nonmetro Immigrants, Naturalized and Noncitizen, Are Children

A striking age difference appeared between metro and nonmetro immigrants who entered the United States since 1980, as well as between nonmetro immigrants and the native nonmetro population. Among nonmetro immigrants, 38 percent of naturalized citizens and 24 percent of noncitizens were under 18, compared with 12 percent of naturalized citizens and 19 percent of noncitizens in the metro immigrant population and 28 percent

Figure 1

Foreign-born population by region, 1996

Nonmetro immigrants are concentrated in the South and West



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 Current Population Survey.

in the native nonmetro population (fig. 3). This large proportion of children among non-metro immigrants, especially among citizens, may have implications for the cost of immigration in nonmetro communities, particularly for public education.

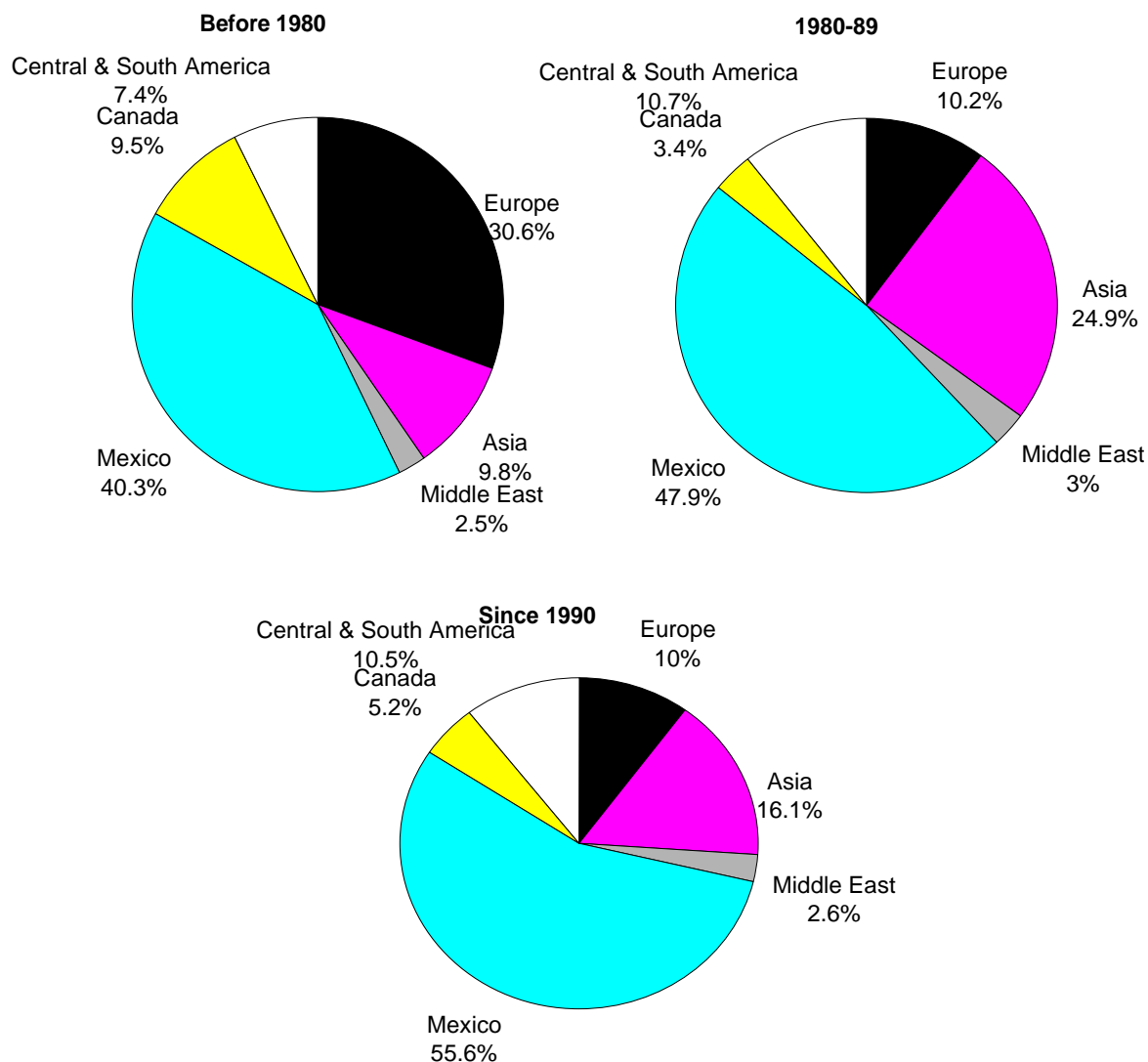
Nonmetro Immigrants Less Likely Than Metro To Have Finished High School or College

Nonmetro immigrants age 25 and older were generally less likely than their metro counterparts to have finished high school or college and the difference has become more pronounced among more recent immigrants. Metro immigrants who have arrived since 1980 include decreasing proportions with less than a high school education, while among non-metro immigrants, that proportion has remained steady.

Figure 2

Country of origin of nonmetro foreign-born persons

Immigration from Mexico and Asia has increased while immigration from Europe has declined



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 Current Population Survey.

Citizenship status affected this generalization, however. Those nonmetro immigrants who had become naturalized citizens reported higher levels of educational achievement than metro immigrants who remained noncitizens.

Occupations of Nonmetro Immigrants Vary by When They Entered the United States

A fairly large share of employed naturalized immigrants in nonmetro areas who entered the country before 1990 worked in managerial and professional occupations (14 percent managerial, 17 percent professional, compared with 9 and 11 percent, respectively, of nonmetro natives). This reflects both special immigration provisions for workers with relatively scarce professional skills and the amount of time these earlier immigrants have had in the United States to become established in such occupations. Naturalized nonmetro immigrants also frequently reported service, craft and repair, and machine operator and assembler occupations. Among this group of earlier nonmetro immigrants, those who remained noncitizens most commonly worked in machine operation and assembly (16 percent); craft and repair (15 percent); farming, forestry, and fishing (14 percent); and service (13 percent) occupations.

More recent nonmetro immigrants (since 1990) worked in somewhat different occupations. Among those who had become naturalized citizens, the largest concentration worked in farming, forestry, and fishing (18 percent). Other frequently reported occupations among this group included clerical (18 percent), sales (12 percent), and transportation (10 percent). Among recent nonmetro immigrants who still remained noncitizens, the most frequently reported occupations were service (15 percent) and transportation (14 percent).

Metro immigrants, regardless of year of entry, reported higher proportions working in service, clerical, and technical occupations than in other sectors; nonmetro natives reported clerical and sales occupations more frequently than did nonmetro immigrants, and showed a much more even distribution across occupational categories than did immigrants.

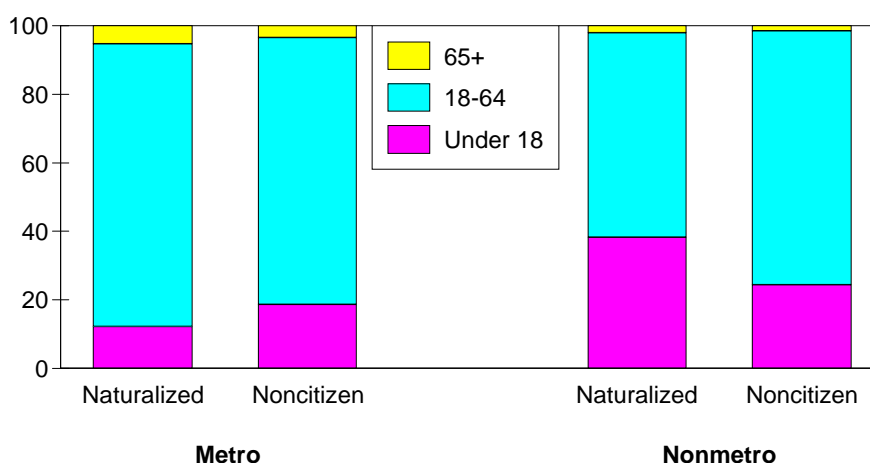
Nonmetro Immigrants Have Lower Median Earnings Than Metro Immigrants and Nonmetro Natives

Median earnings varied considerably between metro and nonmetro residence, but the benefit of metro residence was greatest for immigrants who had been in the country the longest. Median earnings for nonmetro immigrants who entered the United States before

Figure 3

Age distribution of the foreign-born population entering since 1980

Proportion of children is higher among nonmetro than metro immigrants



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 Current Population Survey.

1980 were only 76 percent of that for immigrants in metro areas. For immigrants who entered between 1980 and 1989, however, median earnings for nonmetro residents were 86 percent of the metro median, and for the most recent immigrants (arrived since 1990), nonmetro residents earned 89 percent of the median for metro residents.

This increasing similarity of median earnings between metro and nonmetro immigrants as time in the United States decreased reflects proportionately lower earnings for more recently arrived immigrants to metro areas than for nonmetro immigrants. Median earnings for metro immigrants who arrived before 1980 reached \$21,000, compared with \$16,000 for the same nonmetro group. For those metro immigrants who arrived during the 1980's, the median reached only \$15,000, compared with \$13,000 for nonmetro immigrants who entered during that decade. Among the most recent immigrants, metro median earnings were only \$11,840, compared with \$10,533 for recent nonmetro immigrants.

Nonmetro naturalized citizens fared better than nonmetro noncitizens, however. In all year-of-entry categories, nonmetro naturalized citizens had higher median earnings than the median for nonmetro natives, possibly reflecting the high frequency of well-paid managerial and professional occupations among naturalized citizens in nonmetro areas. Noncitizens, in contrast, had lower median earnings than nonmetro natives across all year-of-entry categories.

Unemployment and Poverty Rates Highest for Nonmetro Immigrants

Earnings may have been affected by the fact that nonmetro immigrants were more likely to be unemployed than metro immigrants and nonmetro natives, particularly if they were noncitizens. The highest unemployment rates were for recent (since 1990) nonmetro immigrants (10 percent of naturalized citizens; 11.4 percent of noncitizens). Least likely to be unemployed were metro immigrants who entered before 1980 (5.4 percent for noncitizens; 2.4 percent for naturalized citizens).

As a result of lower earnings, a larger proportion of immigrants than natives were below the poverty line in both metro and nonmetro areas. Poverty rates were higher for noncitizens in both metro and nonmetro areas and were highest for immigrants who had been in the country the shortest time. For all but the most recent immigrants (arrived since 1990), rates were highest in nonmetro areas.

Nonmetro Immigrants Generally Receive Government Assistance at Lower Rates than Metro Immigrants

Nonmetro immigrants across all year-of-entry categories received public assistance income, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), at about the same rate (2.3 percent) as natives (2.2 percent) and at a lower rate than metro immigrants (3.1 percent) (fig. 4). Within year-of-entry categories, those nonmetro immigrants who came to the United States before 1980 and those who arrived since 1990 received public assistance at lower rates than natives (1.2 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively), while nonmetro immigrants who arrived during the 1980's received public assistance at a higher rate (3.7 percent) than natives. For metro immigrants, the pattern was slightly different, with a relatively low rate for those arriving before 1980 (1.9 percent, below the native metro rate of 2.4 percent), but with similar rates for those arriving in the 1980's (3.7 percent) and 1990's (3.4 percent).

The rates for receipt of Food Stamps, a noncash benefit, followed a different pattern. For all nonmetro immigrants, the rate for receipt of Food Stamps (12.6 percent) exceeded that for nonmetro natives (11.5 percent), although remaining, like cash assistance, below that for metro immigrants (17.4 percent) (fig. 4). When examined by year-of-entry categories, nonmetro immigrants who arrived before 1980 had the lowest rate (2.7 percent), well below that for native residents. Nonmetro immigrants who arrived after 1990 received Food Stamps at a higher rate (14.3 percent) than natives, but at a much lower rate than nonmetro immigrants who arrived during the 1980's (20.4 percent).

The earliest metro immigrants, those who arrived before 1980, had a higher rate of Food Stamp use (7.4 percent) than nonmetro immigrants, although still below the native metro rate (10 percent). Metro immigrants who arrived in the 1980's received Food Stamps at a lower rate (13.9 percent) than did those who arrived in the 1990's (16.2 percent).

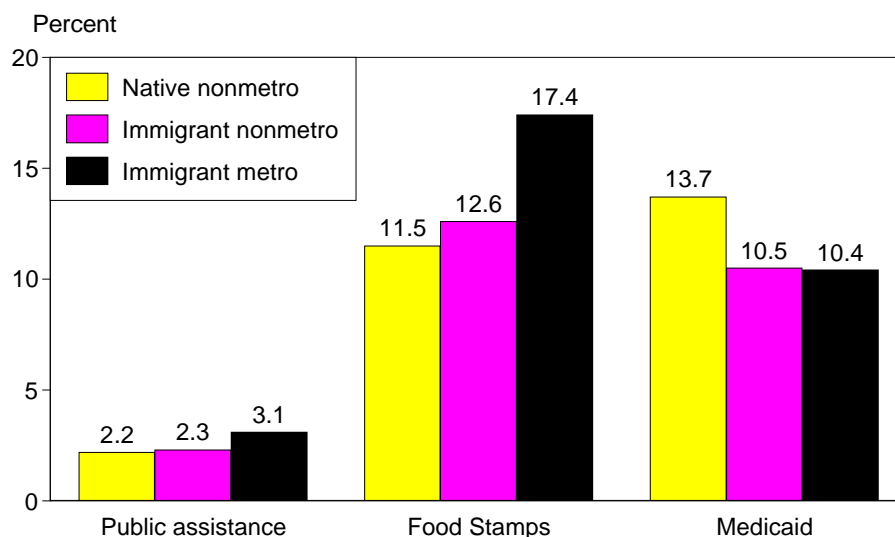
Metro and nonmetro immigrants received Medicaid, another noncash benefit, at the same rate (10.4 percent and 10.5 percent), and both rates were below those for metro and nonmetro natives (11.5 percent and 13.7 percent) (fig. 4). Similar to the pattern for Food Stamp use, nonmetro immigrants who entered during the 1980's had the highest rate of Medicaid use (18.2 percent), followed among nonmetro immigrants by those who arrived in the 1990's (9.1 percent) and those who arrived before 1980 (6.1 percent). For metro immigrants, the highest rate for receipt of Medicaid benefits occurred among immigrants who arrived in the 1990's (16.9 percent), followed by those who arrived in the 1980's (13.5 percent) and those who arrived before 1980 (9 percent).

New eligibility rules for both income assistance and noncash benefit programs under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (commonly known as the Welfare Reform law) will affect receipt of government assistance by noncitizen immigrants. Because nonmetro immigrants overall have received such assistance at lower rates than metro immigrants, these changes may have a smaller impact in nonmetro areas. Moreover, the new welfare eligibility rules allow noncitizen immigrants who have worked or whose spouse or parents have worked for at least 10 years (40 quarters), to continue to receive government assistance. This may further reduce the impact of rule changes on nonmetro areas since the highest rate of receipt among nonmetro immigrants of both income and noncash benefits was for those who arrived in the 1980's, many of whom may qualify to retain benefits. On the other hand, the greater prevalence of seasonal agricultural workers among the nonmetro immigrant population may cause the rule changes to have a greater effect in some areas, since minimum continuous work requirements may be harder for them to document. [Anne B. W. Efland, 202-501-8448 (after October 31, 202-694-5319), aeffland@econ.ag.gov, and Margaret A. Butler, 202-219-0534 (after October 24, 202-694-5417), mbutler@econ.ag.gov]

Figure 4

Foreign-born and native nonmetro population receiving government assistance

Nonmetro immigrants receive most government assistance at lower rates than metro immigrants



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 Current Population Survey.